Dirt, sandals, kingdom? Words that describe the world Jesus lived in. They are words meant to provide a fuller meaning of the word king. It makes sense that Jesus was all about dirt. He wrote notes in the dirt in the face of danger, used dirt to make a healing mud, and told the disciples to shake the dirt off their feet when they found no peace in a town. In the heart of the Gospels, Jesus is in the thick of dirt.

He is giving the disciples a road map on how to travel into cities, preaching and teaching. Jesus is focused on dirt and seeds and what needs to be rooted and tilled and tended in the midst of foreign occupation, poverty, and hostility. His kingship or leadership is so radical. There is so much injustice, so many principalities to rail against and instead he preaches about dirt and seeds. You think he is going to condemn the institutions and maybe demand some kind of military revolution to fight against the oppression, instead, Jesus focuses four parables in a row on something very different: the dirt and seeds growing in us. He starts with the idea of plucking seeds on the Sabbath, talks about the sower and the seed, and gives insight on who puts the weeds among the wheat, and finally we remember the miraculous growth that can take place from a small mustard seed.

What does dirt, and seeds and mustard seeds have to do with Christ’s King Sunday? Everything. They describe the spiritual life of Jesus. From these three words, dirt, sandals and kingdom, the life of Jesus is described in tactile ways to help us see ourselves more clearly. From dirty feet being washed at the hands of a woman to the chains that sink deeply into the flesh of Jesus as he is dragged off to see Caiaphas, Jesus shows us what the kingdom of God must look like.

For us to understand the words from the Gospel of John this week, we must go back to dirt. Go back to the simple life Jesus lived. We must return to hearing the rooster crowing three times as Peter denies knowing Jesus. We must feel the fear Jesus may have felt as he was taken in chains first, to Caiaphas, the high priest, and then dragged to the governor’s palace to go before Pilate. We must hear the sneer coming forth from Pilate, as he questions Jesus about his kingdom. How ridiculous. How insane to think Jesus is a king; how perverse to imagine there is a better way to live than a proud and wealthy Roman.

But, Jesus stands firm when asked what his kingdom is like. “My kingdom,” said Jesus, ‘doesn’t consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn’t be handed over to the Jews. But I’m not that kind of king, not the world’s kind of king.” Pilate doesn’t hesitate to confront Jesus about his kingship and quickly says, “So, are you a king or not? Jesus does a wily sidestep himself when he answers Pilate, “You tell me if I am a king. I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to the truth. Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for the truth, recognizes my voice.” Pilate responds with a typical rational question, “What is truth?”

On some level Pilate knows that Jesus is not a king of anything. He’s a low-life prophet who has made the Jewish leaders angry, so Pilate does the expected, he washes his hands of Jesus.

This morning we are Pilate, the man who refuses to understand what truth Jesus is sharing among areas of Palestine. We are that same Pilate who looks out among the city and sees only what he wants to see, and the idea that a King knows anything about dirt is unreasonable. Yet, we too, live among the dirt. We, too, look out at neighbors who may be struggling. We, too, wring our hands over the homeless situation in The Dalles. We, too, may be a Pilate who refuses to get our hands dirty.

Let me give you an example of how dirt and neighbors foster healing. When I was a kid of around 8 years old the neighbor who lived one house down from me, had a large family of 8 kids. The father had moved to The Dalles to work at Martin Marietta Aluminum company. As was common for most families, the mother stayed home with the kids. The mom’s name was Maime, and her fresh cookies and a smile seemed to be the only welcome mat needed for us kids to march daily in and out of her home. Of course, being with friends with the kids also gave us easy access to their home. Maime was wonderful, and all us kids knew it. They also knew, that if you stepped out of line, she had no problem grabbing the wooden spoon from her cooking utensils and waving it in the air. Although, I suspect she never planned to use it.

One day a bunch of us kids rushed over to Maime’s house and found her crying on the porch. During that day her husband of 52 had died of a heart attack on the job. Being kids, we had no idea how to comfort her, so the best thing we could do was rush home and tell our mom’s what had happened. By early evening, most of the neighbors had stopped by to visit with Maime, and they had all brought food to help Maime out. There was no welfare or food stamps to help this family of nine out, so I imagine Maime was filled with, not only sadness but fear on how to care for her large family. With a small pension and social security, Maime stayed in her home on 12th St. to raise all 8 kids. So, here is where dirt fits into my story.

From the moment the neighbors learned of Maime’s husband dying, her household became part of every household in the neighborhood. When her garden needed rototilled, my dad stepped in. When she needed meat for her table, the hunter’s from our neighborhood and beyond brought their packaged deer, elk, and fish they caught to help feed her family. When it was time to can fruit and vegetables a neighborhood weekend was planned. Maime was cared for by our neighbors for 10 years, and all through those years the neighbors stepped into the dirt of a family trying to survive. And the truth is, all of us live our daily lives in the same kind of dirt.

What truth was Jesus pointing to as he talked with Pilate … dirt; the dirt we deal with in our daily lives. We all deal with dirt, which is the ordinary physical, emotional and spiritual challenges on how to live our lives. Jesus wants us to see the dirt we live in clearly, otherwise, we become the Pilate who cannot phantom who Jesus is.

During the past year and half our small congregation has suffered from a lack of relationship. Loneliness became a part of our lives, and we were forced to find alternative ways to connect with each other. Zoom services and connection helped but we found it wasn’t enough to stem feelings of being alone. Our dirt became how to navigate our feelings of loneliness, and now we are striving to come back together.

The truth Jesus refers to when talking with Pilate is neighborhood love for each other. The truth behind this kind of love is based on servants wearing sandals, where it is more important to meet the needs of the whole over any one person. We may celebrate one Sunday a year as Christ the King, but the truth is, I wonder if Jesus would have accepted this role. Or would Jesus lean into the kingdom he was trying to describe to the people he hung-out with, one based on loving our neighbors as ourselves; a kingdom where we would care for a neighbor named Maime regardless of skin color or economy. Amen.